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ABSTRACT

In the past 15 years, women have made substantial strides in remedying several longstanding injustices towards women in art. Through considerable pressure and discussion, a small group of women succeeded in convincing the Brooklyn Museum of Art to host an exhibition of women artists in the 1970s. Women art professors also staged a successful boycott of one of the standard college survey texts on art history, "History of Art." At an annual caucus, these women refused to use the second edition of this text, published in 1977, because the author did not include or acknowledge the contributions of women to art. Women's art as a successful movement emerged in the 1970's. It is now a recognized force because of the concerted efforts of women's groups. However, at this juncture, women artists need to recognize that their needs are identical to male artists'. In the future, women in the arts and humanities must reflect individualities and help to abolish male and female stereotypes. Women artists must now focus on creating a new definition of society and a new humanism. (LP)

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THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES--SEEING OUR WORLD ANEW

[and]

THE FUTURE FOR WOMEN IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

by
Lydia M. Peña

SP 015 688

Paper presented at the Opening of Women's History Week (Arvada, CO, March 1984) and paper presented at the Annual Women's Studies Conference (8th, Greeley, CO, January 1984).

THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES--SEEING OUR WORLD ANEW

The question I want to address this afternoon is twofold: How can we stimulate our imaginations to envision our world anew; to envision an alternate world, a more just world, a world in which compassion is given a new public dignity; and then, how can we encourage one another to help create this more just world in our own cultural institutions and in the world at large?

The best way I know to reflect on this question is a way that I've learned from the women's movement--that is, in terms of my own personal experience.

Since I am an art historian, and in recent years, I've even had the courage to call myself an artist, and since art history and art are cultural institutions, I would like to share with you something about the way feminism has led me to question and reformulate my own position in relation to the arts and to history itself.

How has feminism transformed for me the nature of art, the institution of art and the whole way I look at art history? In talking about me, about myself, I'm talking about a social issue. Let me explain. Since I see self and society as interconnected, the self is for me a part of the social group that happens to be enclosed in a certain boundary by skin and bones and has incorporated a great many values and ideals of the larger society. Even the feelings one thinks of as being most personal are ultimately gotten from somewhere. And what is that somewhere? It's the particular historical, social and cultural institutions that one is born into, or that one moves into. Let me say here that I believe that each human being is unique. But we are an integral part of our society.

In the 50s, that decade when we saw issues as black or white with little or no grey in between, I was pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Dietetics, and for one of my electives, I enrolled in my first Humanities class. The class focused on the visual arts. I had a very stimulating teacher; I learned a lot and thoroughly enjoyed it. I was then a student at Loretto Heights College, then a women's, Catholic college. Not one women artist was mentioned, nor did I question their absence. That was the way things were. That was what my particular historical, social and cultural situation was giving me, and I had not yet experienced the value of my imagination, nor did I have the confidence to know that I had the capacity to act on that imagination.

In the late 60s--during the academic year 1968-69 I had the privilege of living in Madrid, Spain where I interviewed several contemporary Spanish painters. Among them was Antoni Tapies, Antonio Saura, Manolo Rivera and Rafael Canogar. Not one woman, and I don't even remember seeing one solo exhibition by a woman artist. Doña Juana Mordo, the woman responsible for making Spanish abstract artists known in the United States, did not recommend one woman artist, nor did I ask to interview one.

In the early 70s, I began to read about small groups of women in New York and California who were protesting the injustices against women in the art world. Probably the most notable example of the impact women can make is a meeting on December 12, 1972 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Several woman-artist representatives met with the museum's director about a projected exhibition. Discussion broke down, but those women forced the director to make the auditorium available for a discussion on:

Are Museums Relevant to Women?"

A panel of women addressed a large audience on the inequity of the art system as symbolized by museums at large. In 1976 an exhibition entitled

"Women Artists, 1550 to 1950," with Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin as curators opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was a traveling exhibition that ended at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin shared with the Women's Caucus for the Arts the difficulties they had in finding museums who were willing to take the exhibition. (And I certainly identify with that after looking for museums to take the Tait Retrospective). The point I want to make is that in four short years the Brooklyn Museum had changed radically in its thinking. Why? Because a small group of women (just like you and me) had stimulated one anothers' imaginations. They envisioned a more just situation, and by supporting one another they brought it about.

Another example of the injustices toward women in the Art world is evidenced in the two most widely used Art History survey texts. Those of you who have taken an Art History course no doubt know that there are two standard texts that are used by most colleges and universities throughout the country. Helen Gardener's Art Through the Ages, first published in 1926, and H.W. Janson's History of Art first publised in 1962.

First I'll talk about Gardner's Art Through the Ages. In the preface of the 7th and most recent edition of Art Through the Ages printed in 1980, the editors Horst de la Croix and Richard Tansey praise Miss Gardner (who died in 1946) for her enthusiasm, knowledge and humanity. She completed the third edition shortly before her death and like so many of us, was not aware that there had been great women artists. Finally, in this seventh edition printed in 1980 her editors have included 5 women artists--Rosa Bonheur, Mary Cassatt, Georgia O'Keefe, Bridget Riley and Louise Nevelson.

When H. W. Janson from New York University came out with his text in October 1962 , Art Historians were all ready for a change. Because it was so well received, there were three printings in 1963 and one or two printings every subsequent year. In 15 years, by 1977, there had been 21 printings. That year he came out with the second edition and did not include one single woman artist. Cindy Nemser, editor of the Feminist Art Journal, interviewed Janson and he emphatically declared that there had never been great women artists. At the Women's Caucus for the Arts in January 1978, we all decided to boycott Janson's Survey Text. Since 1977 there have only been 3 printings. (Janson died on September 30, 1982 at the age of 69). Again, women as a group have an example of our effectiveness when we join forces.

The year 1977 was a significant one for me. That year Feminism had an enormous intellectual, spiritual and practical breakthrough in my life. I was on a sabbatical from Loretto Heights College and a visiting scholar at the National Museum of American Art where I was doing my research for the Tait Retrospective which is presently on exhibit in the downstairs gallery. Because I was also a member of the first women's team in my Loretto Community, I got involved with many women's groups.

That same year I saw the exhibition, Women Artists, 1550 to 1950, which I mentioned earlier, at the Brooklyn Museum. What an emotional experience that was. Here I saw great art, tangible evidence that the art history books are incomplete. I realized that no matter what Janson said, or more accurately and significantly, didn't say, women artists were part of the entire evolution of Western painting even though they were not in the mainstream. There I saw Agnes Tait's Skating in Central Park for the first time. She was one of the 36 twentieth century American Artists included in that exhibition.

I have given you a few significant examples of how women in my own cultural institution have effected change. That is by doing, writing, publishing, and simply thinking about issues. I believe that thinking is one of the most important forms of action because it's a form of action that leads to the truth, and it is only through truth that one can arrive at what is really the whole point of the woman's movement--the achievement of justice. Let me say here that thinking is one of the most important forms of arriving at truth and we need to make sure that in the future intuition and compassion are given the same kind of public dignity.

My sisters, let us go forth to achieve this more just world in our own cultural institutions, and in the world at large. Let us make sure that we, women, elect our next United States President. And here I want to put in an ad for Eleanor Smeal's new book, Why and How Women Will Elect the Next President. I have the information on how to order it if any of you want to see me later.

But let us convince ourselves that together we can create a more just world where compassion is given a new public dignity. My sisters we have a mission, let us go forth to fulfill it.

Given by Dr. Lydia Peña

Opening of Women's History Week
Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities
March 1984

THE FUTURE FOR WOMEN IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

I want to begin my remarks this afternoon by posing some questions which will, hopefully, stimulate our imaginations regarding our future in the arts and humanities. Because my field of study is art history my comments this afternoon will more specifically pertain to women who are creating art, but more generally can apply to all of us.

These are the questions on which I have reflected:

1. What is it that we women artists have now?
2. How have we achieved this position?
3. What is it that we want now?
4. What is it that we can do now?
5. What kind of difference are we capable of making?

Let's take question 1. What is it that we women artists have now? As we know, women's art as a movement emerged in the 1970s in a form unlike that taken by earlier art movements. In the past 13 years women artists in the United States have developed faster than either art critics or dealers have been able to handle. We have become a constituency, growing in number and consciousness. We are no longer fringe contributors to a succession of movements that we have not shared. Lest we become overly confident, however, let me assure us that we have come a long way, but prejudice is not totally extinct. To this day a woman artist has to deal with prejudice from dealers, from the public, from men artists (and sometimes, unfortunately, from older women artists as well). Georgia O'Keefe seems to forget that she once had an auxiliary identity as Mrs. Alfred Stieglitz, the subject of his finest photographs. That kind of prejudice has somewhat abated, but it is still there.

2. How did we achieve our present status? We achieved this position by moving from an individual stance to group affiliation. We have acted in small

coalitions that have been informally structured and we have made great strides in changing the male-oriented system. Probably the most notable example is a meeting on Decmeber 12, 1972 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Discussions between woman-artist representatives of various groups with the museums director concerning a projected exhibition broke down, but the women forced the director to make the auditorium available for a discussion on "Are Museums Relevant to Women?" A panel of women addressed a large audience on inequity of the art system as symbolized by museums at large. This let me remind you took place only 12 years ago. It is the first conspicuous gesture of feminist dissent in the art world that was based on the assumption that the political and cultural oppression of women was a constituent factor in contemporary art. Because I have used the term feminist, I would like to define it. For me, a feminist is one who is willing to work with women to reduce inequality in the long run or to achieve a specific short-term reform. Without the aspect of collaboration, whether it is to found a co-operative gallery, infiltrate an art school, or expose the prejudice of art dealers, a woman artist is not a feminist. Open access to other women is essential, however, a feminist does not sacrifice woman's authentic part of her being by her sense of community. Working together has undoubtedly strengthened us, but it has also separated us from the mainstream. We have in the eyes of many created "Women's art," and, as you know, the overtones have not always been positive.

That feminist sense of community, however, has strengthened us to move from the periphery to the hub where we belong, where we want to be, and where we can make a difference. I quote from an art review by John Russell from the July 24, 1983 issue of the New York Times. "There are more good women artists in the United States than in any other country. This has nothing to do with the size of the population, or even with the overall number of women artists. It has to do with the quality of the work, but it also involves a social factor, a professional factor, a liberationist factor and even (in one recent interpretation) a neurological factor.

It stands for the demise of an ancient, cumbersome and quite pointless distinction. There is no such thing as "women's art." There is just good art, and a great deal of it is now being made by women." Russell continues: It is a matter of fact, and not of opinion, that in the New York of the 1980s shows by women artists (both in museums and in galleries) have been just as rewarding, and just as widely remarked, as shows by men artists."

At this juncture, in our history, more than ever, it seems to me, we need to recognize that our needs are identical with men's. Perhaps, the balance may be different, but the substance is the same. Both men and women need work and love, independence and dependency, solitude and relationship, to enjoy community and to value one's specialness. All to often, though, these polarities have presented themselves to women as insoluable contradictions rather than paradoxes; because general assumption has condoned one set of goals for women to the exclusion of the other. Love, dependency, relationship, community, have been proper feminine goals. Their opposites have been assumed to be of questionable value for a woman, and the woman who presumes to seek them has generally paid a high price.

Art created by women in the future must continue to reflect in greater numbers a state of "becoming," of defining individualities and new realities. Strengthened by community, we must explore our own individuality and abolish masculine and feminine stereotypes. To be full persons we must find what is our most natural way to define our individuality. What this means, of course, is a redefining of the nature of what society can be. It is the fear of this in ourselves and in society at large that keeps us back. We need to convince ourselves that there is a whole realm of possibilities that have not been explored and that we have the capability to explore.

We need to give our compassionate virtues a new public dignity. These virtues need to be given reverence in all of us, both men and women, for they are there.

Courage, daring, decisiveness, resourcefulness are good qualities in women as much as in men. So, too, charity, mercy, tenderness. But ruthlessness, callousness, powerlust, domineering self-assertion....these are destructive, whether in men or women. Women need and should welcome the participation of men in achieving the goal of creating an art that reflects and/or prophesies a new world. A world in which trust and compassion are possible, a world with a level of honesty that refuses pretense. Let us stimulate our female imaginations to send us to an alternate world; let us go forward to create a new humanism.

Given by Dr. Lydia Peña
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